

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

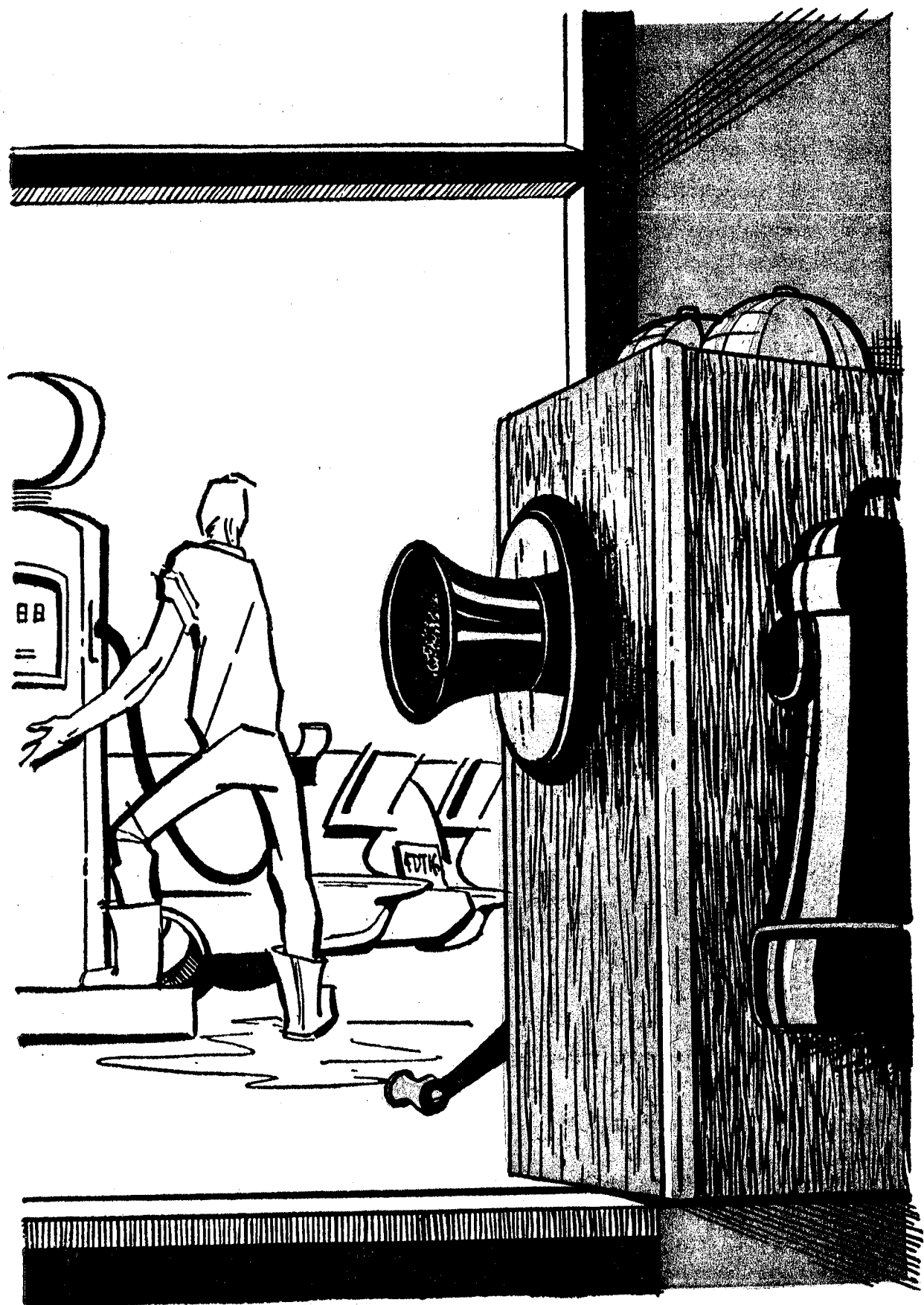
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As you undoubtedly know, mass murder—like plastic—is a product of our times. Therefore, it behooves me to be up-to-date and entertain you, on occasion, with a multiple tragedy.

#8

by Jack Ritchie

I was doing about eighty, but the long flat road made it feel only half that fast.

The red-headed kid's eyes were bright and a little wild as he listened to the car radio. When the news bulletin was over, he turned down the volume.

He wiped the side of his mouth with his hand. "So far they found seven of his victims."

I nodded. "I was listening." I took one hand off the wheel and rubbed the back of my neck, trying to work out some of the tightness.

He watched me and his grin was half-sly. "You nervous about something?"

My eyes flicked in his direction. "No. Why should I be?"

The kid kept smiling. "The police got all the roads blocked for fifty miles around Edmonton."

"I heard that too."

The kid almost giggled. "He's too smart for them."

I glanced at the zipper bag he held on his lap. "Going far?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

The kid was a little shorter than average and he had a slight build. He looked about seventeen, but he was the baby-face type and could have been five years older.

He rubbed his palms on his slacks. "Did you ever wonder what made him do it?"

I kept my eyes on the road. "No."

He licked his lips. "Maybe he got pushed too far. All his life somebody always pushed him. Somebody was always there to tell him what to do and what not to do. He got pushed once too often."

The kid stared ahead. "He exploded. A guy can take just so much. Then something's got to give."

I eased my foot on the accelerator.

He looked at me. "What are you slowing down for?"

"Low on gas," I said. "The station ahead is the first I've seen in the last forty miles. It might be another forty before I see another."

I turned off the road and pulled to a stop next to the three pumps. An elderly man came around to the driver's side of the car.

"Fill the tank," I said. "And check the oil."

The kid studied the gas station. It was a small building, the only structure in the ocean of wheat fields. The windows were grimy with dust.

I could just make out a wall phone inside.

The kid jiggled one foot. "That old man takes a long time. I don't like waiting." He watched him lift the hood to check the oil. "Why does anybody that old want to live? He'd be better off dead."

I lit a cigarette. "He wouldn't agree with you."

The kid's eyes went back to the filling station. He grinned. "There's a phone in there. You want to call anybody?"

I exhaled a puff of cigarette smoke. "No."

When the old man came back with my change, the kid leaned toward the window. "You got a radio, mister?"

The old man shook his head. "No. I like things quiet."

The kid grinned. "You got the right idea, mister. When things are quiet you live longer."

Out on the road, I brought the speed back up to eighty.

The kid was quiet for a while, and then he said, "It took guts to kill seven people. Did you ever hold a gun in your hand?"

"I guess almost everybody has."

His teeth showed through twitching lips. "Did you ever point it at anybody?"

I glanced at him.

His eyes were bright. "It's good to have people afraid of you," he said. "You're not short any more when you got a gun."

"No," I said. "You're not a runt any more."

He flushed slightly.

"You're the tallest man in the world," I said. "As long as nobody else has a gun too."

"It takes a lot of guts to kill," the kid said again. "Most people don't know that."

"One of those killed was a boy of five," I said. "You got anything to say about that?"

He licked his lips. "It could have been an accident."

I shook my head. "Nobody's going to think that."

His eyes seemed uncertain for a moment. "Why do you think he'd kill a kid?"

I shrugged. "That would be hard to say. He killed one person and then another and then another. Maybe after awhile it didn't make

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any difference to him what they were. Men, women, or children. They were all the same."

The kid nodded. "You can develop a taste for killing. It's not too hard. After the first few, it doesn't matter. You get to like it."

He was silent for another five minutes. "They'll never get him. He's too smart for that."

I took my eyes off the road for a few moments. "How do you figure that? The whole country's looking for him. Everybody knows what he looks like."

The kid lifted both his thin shoulders. "Maybe he doesn't care. He did what he had to do. People will know he's a big man now."

We covered a mile without a word and then he shifted in his seat. "You heard his description over the radio?"

"Sure," I said. "For the last week."

He looked at me curiously. "And you weren't afraid to pick me up?"

"No."

His smile was still sly. "You got nerves of steel?"

I shook my head. "No. I can be

scared when I have to, all right."

He kept his eyes on me. "I fit the description perfectly."

"That's right."

The road stretched ahead of us and on both sides there was nothing but the flat plain. Not a house. Not a tree.

The kid giggled. "I look just just like the killer. Everybody's scared of me. I like that."

"I hope you had fun," I said.

"I been picked up by the cops three times on this road in the last two days. I get as much publicity as the killer."

"I know," I said. "And I think you'll get more. I thought I'd find you somewhere on this highway."

I slowed down the car. "How about me? Don't I fit the description too?"

The kid almost sneered. "No. You got brown hair. His is red. Like mine."

I smiled. "But I could have dyed it."

The kid's eyes got wide when he knew what was going to happen.

He was going to be number eight.

